Second Edition

the el·e·ments of En·glish

A glossary of basic terms for literature, composition, and grammar

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Contents

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Preface to the Second Edition
(The Elements of English: A Glossary of Basic Terms for Literature, Composition, and Grammar)

Since the summer of 1986, when this book first appeared as *A Handlist to English: Basic Terms for Literature, Composition, and Grammar*, two books on American education have become bestsellers: *Cultural Literacy* by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom. They are the latest in what has become, during the 1980's, a serial indictment of American education generally and American education curricula specifically. Although both books have helped us to better understand our suspicions that American education may be, in some ways, out of focus, Professor Hirsch's thesis proved particularly to be attuned to our own idea for *A Handlist*. He maintains that learning is based upon "cultural literacy" or a "shared national vocabulary." Our attempt to develop such a core vocabulary, however, was aimed at the English classroom, whether traditional or whole language,

and its interrelated areas of literature, composition, grammar, and discussion.

We interviewed students and teachers from elementary and secondary schools and from colleges and universities; researched glossaries, handbooks, textbooks, and curriculum guides; and reviewed our own combined teaching experience in public schools (remedial and average-level literature, composition, and grammar courses, as well as sections of gifted and talented, honors, and advanced-placement students) and in colleges and universities (composition and literature courses). Our objective was to compile a list of basic terms for literature, composition, and grammar—common, non-specialized terms that most students from 7th grade to 12th grade, regardless of ability grouping, would have been exposed to and expected to be familiar with by graduation from high school.

This revised edition has enlarged upon that objective in three specific ways. First, we reconsidered each definition and revised as necessary to insure that every definition is the one most commonly taught. Second, to supplement our original core vocabulary, we included—as main entries, subentries, or examples—appropriate terms, names, and expressions that Professor Hirsch has included in his "What Literate Americans Know, A Preliminary List." (Most of the language-arts terms on that list were included in our original *Handlist*.) Third, to make this book more useful in the classroom, we have included sections on basic rules for capitalization and punctuation. We have also added a list of those works we consulted.

Stan Malless
Jeff McQuain
October 1987

Preface to the First Edition
(A Handlist to English: Basic Terms for Literature, Composition, and Grammar)

As teachers of high school and college English, we have been made uncomfortably aware each year of the need for *A Handlist to English: Basic Terms for Literature, Composition, and Grammar*. Unfortunately, many current glossaries cover only one area of the language arts: literature *or* composition *or* grammar; these glossaries tend to be lengthy and complicated, often leaving students confused. Therefore, our purpose was to compose a handlist of brief yet precise definitions for the *basic* terms in all three areas of the high school and introductory college English curriculum.

That purpose guided the working strategy for our *Handlist*. We researched the current English language-arts textbooks, curriculum guides, handbooks (both in and out of print), and dictionaries. Also, we consulted a representative cross-section of both students and teachers (Grades 8–12 and introductory college level) to select only those terms that are required of the *majority* of high school students as well as college freshmen. We then wrote an original definition for

each term. In every definition, we tried to strike a balance between keeping the entry concise and explaining the term clearly. Five years ago, we began this *Handlist*, well knowing that definitions are never unanimously accepted but that definitions are always unanimously needed.

As convenient for students as a classroom handout, our *Handlist* is comparatively brief. Thus, it will be very helpful as a means of quick review for both the desperate student before test time and the perplexed parent at homework time. To expedite that "quick review" even further, we have added an index that lists alphabetically not only the basic terms but also some of the not-so-basic terms that we found necessary to include within the main entries.

Finally, teachers of English will find our *Handlist* helpful because of its comprehensiveness and brevity. In fact, as teachers across the curriculum look for ways to improve language-arts skills, the need for texts both useful and usable in and out of the classroom increases. We believe that *A Handlist to English* satisfies this need.

Stan Malless
Jeff McQuain
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I.
Literature—
the *art* of written communication

allegory—a story developed through characters, places, and events that often represent concepts such as good and evil. In a common type of *allegory*, a "good" character or place has a name with "good" connotations (Virtue or Humility), and a bad character or place has a name with "bad" connotations (Vice or Vanity); the personality of each character or the quality of each place is defined by the meaning of the name of that character or place. For example, in the 19th-century American short story "Young Goodman Brown" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the main character, Goodman Brown, is a good man, and his wife, Faith, is faithful, but when Goodman Brown enters a dark and gloomy forest, his goodness is tested. Also, the events of an allegory are metaphorical. The slaying of a dragon, for instance, can represent the triumph of good over evil.

TIP: An allegory is a type of metaphor that often teaches a moral lesson.

alliteration—the repetition of the same first sound, either consonant or vowel, in two or more words. These words must be either side-by-side or very close together. *Allit-*

eration is used, for example, in the title of a famous 17th-century English allegory by John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Following are other examples of alliteration:

1. "Sounds of Silence" (two words very close together)
2. The source was cited (two words beginning with the same sound but different letters)
3. "East of Eden" (two words beginning with the same vowel sound).

allusion—a reference to either someone or something (historical or fictional) in a work of literature when that someone or something does not appear in that work.

EXAMPLE: A work of literature about a 20th-century heroine might include this sentence: "She has the wisdom of Athena." The *allusion* is to the Greek mythological goddess Athena, who is referred to but is not a character in the work itself.

ambiguity—more than one meaning. In a work of literature, a word or a gesture can have more than one meaning at the same time. One example of *ambiguity* is the word "right" because it can mean both "correct" and "opposite to left" at the same time, as in the sentence "Be sure to take the right turn."

NOTE: A famous book on ambiguity in literature is *The Seven Types of Ambiguity* by the 20th-century English critic William Empson.

anachronism—any person or thing described as existing in a period of history other than its own. For example, the title of a 19th-century novel by the American writer Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, includes an *anachronism*.

analogy—any type of expression that describes one pair of unlike things as if it were another pair of unlike things, without specifically stating how those pairs are similar.

"bio" (life) + "graph" (to write) =
"To write (about) someone's life."

blank verse—lines of poetry that do not end in rhyme but do have approximately the same number of syllables in each line (that is, they have the same meter, usually iambic pentameter). The most famous examples of *blank verse* may be found in Shakespeare's plays:

"To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing, end them. . . ."

(*Hamlet*, III, i, 55–59)

catastrophe—the fatal action that occurs near the end of a tragedy and involves the main characters. Usually the *catastrophe* is either the death or the downfall of the hero/ heroine or the villain or both of those characters. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, the catastrophe is the death of both Romeo and Juliet. In another example, *Death of a Salesman*, by the 20th-century American playwright Arthur Miller, the catastrophe is the death of Willy Loman in the final act of the play.

NOTE: What is referred to in tragedy as catastrophe can be referred to in comedy as denouement.

catharsis—a term used by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle to describe the emotional release of pity and fear that a tragedy makes us feel. When a good character suffers in a tragedy, we fear for as well as pity that character's life, as we do, for example, the life of Oedipus in Sophocles's tragedy *Oedipus Rex*.

TIP: The literal meaning of *catharsis* is "cleansing" or "purification."

classicism—a term that refers to the principles of ancient

Greek and Roman art (literature, sculpture, and architecture). Classical Greek authors who influenced English literature include the epic poet Homer (*Iliad* and *Odyssey*), the historian Herodotus (*Histories*), the philosophers Plato (*Republic*) and Aristotle (*Poetics*), and the dramatist Sophocles (*Oedipus Rex*). Classical Roman authors include the orator Cicero (*De Oratore*), the poet-critic Horace (*Ars Poetica*), and the epic poet Virgil (*Aeneid*).

NOTE: *Classicism* was at its height of imitation in English literature during the 18th century, a period referred to as the Neoclassical (or "New" classical) Age.

climax—in traditional drama, the crucial event that occurs at approximately the midpoint in the plot of a play. The *climax* is usually the turning point (or "point of no return") for the main character; from this point on, that character's life takes a turn either for the best (a comedy) or for the worst (a tragedy). In Shakespeare's tragedy *Julius Caesar*, for example, the climax occurs for Brutus when Mark Antony gives his "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech at Caesar's funeral (III, ii).

comedy—a type of drama in which the main characters are united in a happy ending. In *comedy*, the main characters are traditionally good people who fall prey to an error in judgment; however, because that error is recognized before it leads to their downfall, those characters are, in the end, united, often in marriage. Shakespeare wrote a number of comedies, and among those still read and performed today are *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Twelfth Night*.

conflict—in narrative or drama, the opposition between protagonist (hero/heroine) and antagonist (villain). The three basic types of *conflict* are person-versus-person (William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*); person-versus-nature (Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the*

I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire." (272–281)

in medias res—a Latin phrase that means "into the middle of things." *In medias res* describes the way that an epic's plot usually begins: the story begins with action that occurs *after* the beginning of the plot.

TIP: A story that begins in medias res is using a narrative technique similar to the *flashback* because, like the flashback, in medias res takes the reader backward in the time of the story.

irony—the occurrence of the opposite of what is intended or expected. There are three main types of *irony*:

1. *Verbal irony* occurs when what a speaker says is deliberately the opposite of what is true. For example, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony uses verbal irony when he describes Caesar's assassins as "honorable men"; he believes the opposite is true—that they are, in fact, dishonorable men.

2. *Dramatic irony* occurs when the audience or reader is aware that the opposite of what a character expects will either happen or be true. For example, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, dramatic irony occurs in the final act when Romeo thinks Juliet is dead, but the audience knows the opposite is true—that Juliet, in fact, is still alive.

3. *Situational irony* occurs when a person or an audience expects one thing to happen or be true but is unaware that the opposite will happen or be true instead. The surprise endings of some of O. Henry's short stories ("The Gift of the Magi") are examples of situational irony.

KEEP IN MIND: Irony (especially verbal irony) is a figure of speech.

Index of the Terms

Note: Italicized terms are sub-entries included within main entries.